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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of the school-review process as it has evolved in the New South Wales (NSW), Australia, Department of School Education. The paper describes the background and context of the NSW public school system, which has undergone devolved management structures, rapid societal changes, and professional collaboration. The nature and process of school reviews are described in terms of their relationship to the school-effectiveness and school-improvement paradigms. Principles for conducting school reviews and forming quality-assurance teams are discussed. The paper concludes by identifying critical outcomes of school reviews from both a practical and theoretical perspective. A critical outcome of the school-review process is the establishment of skills and qualities that will enable schools to thrive as "learning organizations." Such schools: (1) respond to and drive the impetus for change; (2) are strongly committed to making a difference in the lives of children; (3) are staffed by teachers who work collaboratively to restructure the work of the school; (4) regularly engage in internal-review mechanisms to improve practices and enhance student-learning outcomes; and (5) are staffed by teachers who are committed, life-long learners. One figure is included. (Contains 22 references.) (LMI)

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QUALITY ASSURANCE

DEVELOPMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

THROUGH SCHOOL REVIEWS

Seventh International Congress for
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QUALITY ASSURANCE – DEVELOPMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH SCHOOL REVIEWS

Introduction

This paper focuses on the development of the school review process as it has evolved in the NSW Department of School Education. A brief background and a context statement are provided initially to set the discussion of the school review process within the broader educational environment. The nature and process of school reviews are then explained in terms of their relationship to the school effectiveness and school improvement paradigms. The paper concludes by identifying critical outcomes of school reviews from both a practical and theoretical perspective.

The NSW Public School System

The NSW Department of School Education is the largest school education system in Australia and one of the largest in the world. The school system provides education to over 755,000 students, from kindergarten to year 12, covering approximately 34% of the nation's public school students. The system employs over 60,000 staff who work in almost 2250 schools throughout the state.

For most of the period since its origins in the late nineteenth century, the NSW education system had a Schools Inspectorate. In more recent times, the major responsibility of the Inspectorate had been focused upon the assessment of school staff for promotion purposes, rather than the inspection of schools themselves for assuring standards in public schooling.

Reforms initiated in the late 1980s focused on a "bottom–up approach to school improvement" (Reynolds et al, 1993:41). The intention of such initiatives was that improvement attempts would be owned by those working at the local level, while external experts could still share their expertise and knowledge to enhance the quality of school operations. Such an approach to school improvement strongly emphasised the "journey", but was deficient in terms of actually generating school improvements.

Devolved Management Structures

During periods of economic depression, school systems are often placed under the microscope, in an attempt to improve their performance. Bolman and Deal (1991:6) emphasis that "ambitious efforts to improve organisations are commonplace".

Within the public sector, three major strategies are generally relied upon. The first and most basic strategy for improving an organisation focuses on improving its leadership and management. The leadership literature is replete with mythology that organisations will perform in a superior way if they are managed effectively. Despite the range of management tools now available, rhetoric has not always matched reality.

A second strategy relates to the use of consultants with specialist expertise. Despite their diverse contributions, consultants can only provide guidelines for cultural and structural change. Therefore, they cannot be held responsible for implementation.

A third and more common approach to large scale change in public sector organisations, is through government intervention, legislation, regulation and policy making.

School systems throughout the world are a repeated target for legislative reform by Governments. The experience, however, has not been as desirable as the reforms have promised.

The exception, however, is where opportunities have been provided for ownership of the change process by those responsible for implementation (Fullan, 1991).

The concept of ownership at the local level has been strengthened in NSW more recently through the 'Schools Renewal' initiative. Similar to other education systems across the nation, NSW has embraced the principle of devolution. Schools have been delegated significantly more responsibility and authority to make key educational and operational decisions that previously had been made centrally. In particular, schools have now been provided with control over the

financial resources and increased management flexibility to develop educational programs that respond directly to the needs and aspirations of students and their local community. With varying levels of success, schools have embraced the new philosophy and operate semi-autonomously within policy frameworks and management guidelines.

Discontinuous Change and its Impact on Schools

Initiatives for the decentralisation of power to the local school level have also resulted in varied relationships between the increasingly autonomous schools and their bureaucratic management structures. In Britain the major source for controlling quality is through "locally determined market mechanisms of parental choice..." (Reynolds and Packer, in Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992:171).

Issues of quality are further complicated by the rate of external change occurring in the broader community and the corresponding challenge of school systems to respond to such broad societal change. Mackay (1993) suggests that Australians are currently immersed in an "Age of Redefinition" which will result in a re-assessment of Australian attitudes to social, economic, political, technological and educational change.

From a school perspective, Fullan extrapolates in terms of teachers' roles "to help produce citizens so that they can work productively in increasingly dynamic, complex societies" (1993:4). Such responsibilities relate directly to members of all organisations which are constantly confronted with both responding to and driving change. The nature of change, however, has changed for schools, like other organisations. David Limerick and Bert Carrington (1993) recently described the scenario in schools as "discontinuous change". Drucker (1993) similarly described it as "fast, traumatic, revolutionary change".

A Culture of Collaboration

The NSW Department of School Education has positioned itself to capitalise on this rapid societal change so that each of its workplaces becomes dynamic, working environments where issues are resolved in a collaborative and collegial manner for the mutual benefit of students within schools. Such a transition is

consistent with the thinking of David Hargreaves (1993) who suggested that in the past, educators taught "largely within the isolated privacy of their classrooms, insulated from observation and criticism" (Hargreaves, 1993:2). He suggests that the "culture of individualism" (Hargreaves, 1993) in schools is now being replaced by a culture of collaboration.

Likewise, Shadwick (1993:12) suggests that "the culture of the professional autonomy and separateness of the individual teacher is being replaced by a culture which values the professional autonomy of the school and its community of teachers and parents". Indeed, this trend is almost irreversible, because the rate and extent of change are causing teachers to find it difficult to "withdraw into individualism. Few teachers are now able to exercise the self–reliance and immunity to intervention on which individualism thrives." (Hargreaves, 1993:3). Bruce Joyce (1990) describes the revolution more colourfully in his coruscating phrase "cracking the walls of privatism", as a prerequisite for enhancing the quality of education today. Similarly, Fullan (1991:349) espouses the concept of "alliances" as an effective tool for accomplishing change in education. Partnerships at the intra-school and school community level "promote greater power, both of ideas and of the ability to act on them" (Fullan, 1993:349).

The nature of interactive professionalism simultaneously serves to increase access to and scrutiny of each other's ideas and priorities. However, the real challenge is to ensure that such collaborative practices are strategically focused to ensure maximum benefit for students.

Fullan, (1990) proposes the following solution:

> "Instead of tracing specific policies and innovations, we turn the problem on its head, and ask what does the array of innovative possibilities look like, if we are on the receiving or shopping end. Thus, *institutional development* – changes that increase schools' and districts' capacity and performance for continuous improvements – is the generic solution needed."

School Reviews in NSW

The context statement outlined above, relates to six key features of the NSW School Education System. School reviews play a key role in addressing each of these features to enhance organisational performance at the local level.

1. The first focused on the trend for "bottom-up" ownership of reforms designed to improve schools. There has been a deliberate strategy to involve staff in decision making about school reform to enhance implementation:

   - *the introduction of quality assurance school reviews has been a school and community driven, consultative process.*
   - *the primary responsibility for developing quality systems in schools rests with principals, school councils and school staff, guided and assisted by those personnel with responsibilities for providing support in this process – Directors of schools, quality assurance teams, consultants and others.*
   - *quality assurance teams are composed of teachers, community members, executive staff and are led by a Principal or Director of Schools.*

2. The devolution of management responsibility for schools to the local level has given each school community the opportunity to have direct responsibility, within Departmental parameters, for determining its own educational direction:

   - *the quality assurance review process is designed to assist schools to determine their future educational priorities and directions to enhance the level of student achievement outcomes.*
   - *the focus areas for each school's review are determined initially in light of the school's strategic and management plans. The review process enables the provision of feedback about school priorities, as identified in the school's planning documents.*

3. Devolved management structures in schools have related to considerable variation in quality of leadership and management, teaching processes and student learning outcomes:

   - *quality assurance reviews are designed to focus on a school's current stage of development and to enhance its organisational performance though supporting the development of a culture of continuous improvement.*
   - *quality assurance reviews focus on student learning outcomes as an integral aspect of the review process.*

4. Schools are now constantly confronted by rapid and extensive changes from both within and outside the organisation:

   - *recommendations emanating from the school review process are deliberately framed to capitalise on the change process to facilitate implementation and lead to enhanced student outcomes.*
   - *Fullan (1991) identified three separate yet related stages in the change process: initiation, implementation and continuation. School reviews focus clearly on the first stage of the process and provide recommendations to assist schools to move to further stages in the change process. This issue will be explored in more detail, later in the paper.*

5. An era of privatism is rapidly being replaced by a culture of collaboration and collegiality between and among schools:

   - *school reviews strongly support a strong collaborative foundation among all key stakeholders in the local school community. This is to facilitate implementation and ownership of key recommendations emanating from reviews.*

6. In contrast to focusing on individual programs and innovations, schools must now focus on the collective impact of these for the purpose of institutional development:

   - *school reviews focus specifically on institutional development. This is in direct contrast to the earlier approaches which focused on an assessment of the performance of individual staff or the Principal within the school. Programs which have been strategically identified and implemented are viewed in terms of their impact within the overall organisation and their enhancement of student outcomes.*

Development and Accountability

The fundamental aim of quality assurance is to be able to answer the following question:

How do we know that tomorrow's outcomes will be better than today's and yesterday's?

In order to focus a quality assurance review on the contribution that it can make to *school development*, one might ask the following questions:

- How does this particular school go about the task of meeting the community's needs for education, in the context of addressing statewide priorities for student outcomes?
- What is this school on about? How relevant are the goals of the school to the education needs of the community?
- How does this school know it is achieving what it has set out to do? What are the school's achievements?
- How does this school respond to what it knows about its achievements?

(Cuttance, 1993)

The need to assure quality does not mean that there is something inherently wrong or deficient in the current operation of schools. Rather, it reflects the need to provide a clear framework for public accountability and to ensure that all parts of the organisation develop an approach to continuous improvement and development in providing learning opportunities for students.

Quality assurance brings together two distinct aspects of work in our education system: school development and accountability. Both aspects are fundamental to the core of school operations. Indeed, all members of staff in the school system are accountable for the effectiveness of their own contribution to student learning outcomes. Similarly, all members of our system have a primary responsibility for the development of schools through the improvement of our own work.

Quality assurance reviews therefore serve a dual purpose:

- to assist the development of schools
- to provide a public account of the effectiveness of schools in meeting community needs for schooling

School Reviews in Perspective

The quality assurance reviews use only a fraction of the total resources utilised for assuring quality throughout the NSW school education system. Quality Assurance has three major functions:

- enabling quality assurance practices to become an integral part of the way schools and other parts of the system work,
- reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance practices to assess whether they are achieving their aim of building quality in to all aspects of work throughout the school system, and
- reporting on the effectiveness of schools and of the programs and services supporting schools in the improvement of student outcomes.

The Quality Assurance Directorate addresses these functions through a range of activities, including:

- the establishment of teams to work with school communities in reviewing the performance and development of their schools
- assessing and reporting on the effectiveness of the programs and support services provided to schools
- collaborating with a wide range of operational groups in the system to assist them to develop effective quality assurance practices
- reporting on statewide issues affecting school development and performance to directors and managers responsible for the provision of services and programs to schools.

Quality assurance school reviews are conducted separately from all operational support and administration of schools. They focus on the performance of the school as an organisation and are therefore not part of the process for managing the performance of individual school staff.

a) Principles for the Conduct of School Reviews

- Reviews are conducted separately from the Department's regional structures for the administration and management of schools.

- Reviews are conducted by teams consisting primarily of staff from schools and parent/community members selected for the specific purpose of working in quality assurance review teams.
- The resources available for reviews provide for the relief of teaching principals for the planning and conduct of the review.
- All quality assurance staff appointed to review teams are selected on merit principles and provided with training in review and evaluation methodologies appropriate to the review of school performance and development. The training program is developed in consultation with stakeholders in the educational community.
- Reviews are scheduled in consultation with schools, within the resources available. All reviews will take place on dates that have been agreed by the school.
- The focus of each school review is negotiated and agreed with key stakeholders in the school community.
- Reviews focus on current performance and the most important issues to be addressed for future development to improve student outcomes in individual schools.
- Quality assurance review work recognises the uniqueness of each school community and take its terms of reference from the school's strategic plan and associated outcomes which the school community is seeking to achieve.
- School reviews take account of issues of equity in student outcomes within schools.
- All primary stakeholder groups in the school community will have the opportunity to take part in the review process.
- Reviews provide access to any member of the school community who wishes to make a contribution to the review.
- The process of reviews is collaborative and consultative – involving the participation and agreement of school staff and other members of the school community. The involvement of individual school staff, students and community members in reviews is on a voluntary basis.
- Reviews provide a process by which all persons involved in the process can register any aspects of the review that have not been conducted within the accepted moral and ethical standards of conduct required of staff in schools.
- The review process respects the privacy of all individuals and maintain confidentiality of information provided to review teams.
- Quality assurance review teams include the school principal and at least one member selected from or agreed by the school community.

- Review reports are based on information that is substantiated by the input of the school community to the process. They provide a constructive contribution to the development of the school. They focus on the effectiveness of the school's structures and processes for they are not an aspect of the management of the performance of individual school staff, they do not attribute the performance of the school to individuals.
- Reports are public documents written collaboratively by the school principal and the review team leader.
- Schools are responsible for the dissemination of the information in their reports. Schools provide public access to the report. Reports are tabled by the Minister in Parliament.
- Reports are sensitive to the context of individual schools.
- The findings of the reviews provide information on the effectiveness of the statewide provision of services and programs to schools.
  The reviews provide an appropriate basis for the evaluation of the effectiveness of support programs and of services provided to schools.

b) Quality Assurance Teams

Quality Assurance teams are appointed on the basis of merit from within the NSW Teaching Service. Team members joining Quality Assurance come from classroom teacher, executive and Principal roles within schools. Generally, team members are selected from personnel with the following attributes: "demonstrated commitment to achieving results that are of high value to schools; successful experience in the leadership and development of schools; a broad understanding of issues of education policy and practice; a highly developed capacity to communicate effectively, and demonstrated ability to prepare written reports on the development and performance of schools; proven ability to work collaboratively in a team situation; and an understanding of the principles of equity and of factors associated with educational disadvantage." (Quality Assurance Recruiting Policy, 1993)

Terms of appointment vary from one to four terms.

In addition to the above personnel, all teams also consist of a key community member who plays an integral role in the review process and is selected by the Principal whose school is being reviewed. This selection process is managed at the local level and is undertaken in consultation with both staff and community.

The actual period of time taken in each school to review its operation is dependent upon the student enrolment. Reviews vary in length between one and a half and five days.

The School Review Process

Integral to the functions of quality assurance is the school review process. This strategy represents the "core business" of the work of the Directorate. All NSW Government schools work with a quality assurance team every four years. The actual process consists of 3 separate yet related stages.

Stage 1: Pre-Review

- A preliminary meeting is held between the review team leader and the Principal and key stakeholders in the school's community.
  The major stages of the review process are explained to the stakeholders.
  The parameters of the review are negotiated from the school's Strategic/Management Plan. Key focus areas for data gathering are determined at this meeting. These usually arise from:
  - teaching/learning, curriculum
  - management and leadership
  - school governance

Stage 2: The Review

- Information is gathered by the review team from as wide a variety of sources as possible:
  Interviews with parents and community, staff and student groups.
  Focused observations of classroom and related school activities.
  Document analysis, e.g. School Management Plan, Annual Report, School Budget.
- Daily debriefing sessions are held to discuss the findings in relation to the focus areas of the review.

Formulation of recommendations for the school's further development. A meeting is held at the conclusion of the review to provide a preliminary report for school staff and the community.

Stage 3: Post-Review

- The report is prepared by the team leader in consultation with the school principal.
- The public report is presented by the team leader to the school community before for implementation of the review recommendations by the school, with assistance from the Director of Schools.

An Eclectic Paradigm

As the above outline of school reviews indicates, the approach borrows freely from both the school effectiveness and school improvement literature. Reynolds et al (1993:44) characterise the contrasts between both approaches. (The elements of school reviews are highlighted in bold within Figure 1 below.)

School Effectiveness	School Improvement
• **Focus on schools**	• Focus on individual teachers or groups of teachers
• **Focus on school organisation**	• **Focus on school processes**
• **Data driven, with emphasis on outcomes**	Rare empirical evaluation of effects of changes
• Quantitative in orientation	• **Qualitative in orientation**
• Lack of knowledge about how to implement change strategies	• **Concerned with change in schools exclusively**
• **More concerned with schools at a point in time**	• **More concerned with process of school improvement than its destination**
• **Based on research knowledge**	• **Focus on practitioner knowledge**

Figure 1: Characteristics of School Effectiveness and School Improvement (adapted from Reynolds et al, 1993:44)

School reviews, as they have evolved in NSW, represent a synthesis of both traditions. Such an eclectic approach is consistent with the thinking of Mortimore who argued for transferring "the energy, knowledge and skills of school effectiveness research to the study of school improvement" (1991:223). Likewise, Stoll & Fink support an eclectic paradigm: "It's only when school effectiveness research is merged with what is known about school improvement, planned change and staff development that schools and teachers can be empowered and supported in their growth towards effectiveness." (1992:104)

In this way, school reviews may be readily compared with the notion of school improvement as it was exemplified in the work of the OECD sponsored International School Improvement Project (ISIP), as defined by Velzen et al (1985:48):

> *a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively.*

A further example of the blend of both philosophies, similar in intent to school reviews, is the project entitled "Improving the Quality of Education for All" (IQEA) at the Cambridge Institute of Education. Reynolds et al (1993:46) describe the initiative in this way: "It is pupil outcome oriented, involves measurement of program success or failure at outcome level, but is also concerned with the within-school study of school processes from a qualitative orientation." Similar to School Reviews, its major purpose is to strengthen a school's ability to provide quality schooling for all its students.

The major finding from the IQEA study is that "school improvement works best when a clear and practical focus of development is linked to simultaneous work on the internal conditions within the school". (Reynolds et al, 1993:46)

Critical Outcomes

The outcomes from the school review process can be viewed from both practical and theoretical perspectives.

In the first instance, a synthesis of the recommendations of the first 70 reviews identified the following trends among the findings:

- a very positive perception in the community of individual teachers, principals and programs in the majority of schools
- a large number of student welfare programs designed to directly address the needs of diverse student groups
- perceived inconsistency in the application of discipline and merit award schemes
- the need for greater decision making by students in schools
- the need for clearer delineation of student learning outcomes and more effective practices in assessment and evaluation
- limited parent participation in strategic or long term planning and decision making
- enormous variety in the quality of school based planning
- high level of support among teachers for the practical nature of recently released Key Learning Area syllabus documents

(Cuttance, 1993)

Fullan (1991) highlighted one of the major changes of the 1990s as the need to introduce changes that affect the culture and structure of schools. Similarly, Senge emphasises that "the most salient reason for building learning organisations is that we are only now starting to understand the capabilities such organisations must possess". (1990:5)

A critical outcome of the school review process is the establishment of skills and qualities that will enable such institutions to thrive as "learning organisations". Such schools, for example:

- respond to and drive the impetus for change
- are strongly committed to making a difference to the lives of children, as a commonly shared drive among the staff
- are staffed by teachers who work collaboratively to develop new ways to structure the work of the school
- regularly engage in internal review mechanisms to improve practices and enhance student learning outcomes

- are characterised by teachers who are themselves committed learners with well developed habits of continuous inquiry and learning. They are life-long learners.

School reviews focus on the generation of change processes at the organisational level, which will ultimately lead to enhanced student learning outcomes. From a theoretical perspective, it is useful to consider the construct espoused by Fullan (1991:48) of the change process as three separate yet related phases:

The first phase, entitled "*initiation*", relates to the decision to adopt or proceed with a change. The scope and depth of change varies directly as an outcome of the school review process. However, while stated as recommendations, the review process provides the starting point for a school to launch into a journey of school improvement, one which aims to embed quality management practices. Such a culture of improvement is the outcome of the first steps of "*implementation*" putting an idea or reform, described as a review recommendation, into practice. Such a quality culture will only be successfully integrated into the school, when all staff value the effects and are committed to the process as an on-going part of the school's structure or systems of the "*continuation*" phase.

This conceptualisation of the change process is a useful tool to assist schools to view the school review process within the overall perspective of generating quality management practices, resulting in enhanced student outcomes at the local level.

Discussion

This paper has canvassed a range of issues relating to the school review process and its relationship to school developement and accountability.

The purpose of the paper has been to place in context the school review process and its major contribution to schools. It has provided information about the nature of the review process, the principles underlying its operation and the relationship between school reviews and the implementation of a culture of quality management practices.

The school review process in NSW is still in an embryonic stage of development. Despite its recent origins in this state, the process has already generated significant findings which are having a direct impact on planning and decision making at both local school and system levels. The process draws readily upon both the school effectiveness and school improvement literature, to produce a structured approach to school development and accountability, which is readily espoused by all stakeholders involved in the process. School reviews are already providing schools with the capabilities to become dynamic institutions, more recently referred to as "learning organisations".

Michael Fullan's (1991) schema of the three stages of the change process provides a useful conceptualisation of the relationship between school reviews and quality management practices and the establishment of a culture of quality as a key outcome of the quality journey. As an "integrated enterprise" (Reynolds, 1993:45), school reviews constitute a creative and productive approach towards the direct enhancement of student outcomes.

The challenge of quality assurance now is to enhance the responsiveness of the review process with schools. In this way, schools will not only adopt a system of internal review, but also generate a culture of quality management at every level of their operation. Descriptor statements of best practice in relation to Teaching and Learning, Leadership and Culture, Governance and Management are now being developed on a collaborative basis across a broad range of stakeholder groups in the educational community. These statements will provide an informed basis and framework for discussion in the review process as schools constantly strive to improve their performance.

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